

Countdown to eviction

ON THE MARCH TO



■ Meeting point – protesters gather at Wickford rail station to protest at the impending Dale Farm eviction

Picture: PAUL WATSON

Why move next door is not answer

THE travellers' 11th hour offer to move off Dale Farm was simply not workable, according to Basildon's council leader, Tony Ball.

Site representatives said the "peaceful and sensible solution" was for them to go to the 37 empty legal pitches next door to their camp, near Billericay.

Travellers said they were also prepared to then clear Dale Farm themselves.

However, Mr Ball said the proposed solution did not work as there was simply not enough room for all the 86 families next door.

He urged some of them to move there and said the rest

By JON AUSTIN

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could go to eight designated plots in Liverpool, or take up offers of council housing.

If not, then the eviction would go ahead as planned next Monday.

Patrick Egan, a spokesman for the site, said: "I offered a peaceful solution that would have saved over £18million. He said no."

"That only goes to prove that this is not a green belt issue, but a racist issue. £18million to make sick and elderly homeless, over 100 children taken out school, how can this be justified especially as I offered a peaceful and sensible solution?"



■ Protest – Richard Howitt MEP with traveller children BA49085_12

According to the council, it cannot realistically hold off the eviction, as if there were problems or delays with the travellers offer, it would take months to reorganise and probably not happen until next year.

It also said an expansion of plots at Oak Lane would have to go before the planning committee and there was no time left for that to happen.

Mr Ball said: "We are continuing to urge the travellers to leave peacefully and move onto any legal pitches. This would include Oak Lane, where a number of plots appear to be vacant."

"What we cannot do is expand

capacity of Oak Lane, as has been suggested.

"That would fly in the face of every established guideline for how big a traveller site should be and it would also be against the law."

"If Mr Egan is interested in a peaceful solution, he will look at what legal sites are available to the residents of Dale Farm – both in and beyond Basildon."

However, if all the travellers did move on the legal site, the council is unlikely to remove any in breach of restrictions quickly. It would have to serve enforcement orders, which could be appealed.

Council leader sad to see protest march

BASILDON council leader Tony Ball was in Wickford High Street, with fellow councillor and former leader Malcolm Buckley as the march passed through.

He said police advised them to keep a safe distance, but he wanted to be on hand to reassure residents and traders.

He said: "There was great anxiety and concern in Wickford."

"The town was quieter because of the march, there were less market stalls and less cars in car parks. Businesses said their trade was down and people had avoided Wickford."

Mr Ball said the one of his overriding feelings from the day was sadness.

He said: "It saddened me to see police on horseback and riot vans, that's not what Wickford is about."

He rejected travellers' claims that the eviction was a form of racism.

He added: "If this was anyone, or any group, who committed a criminal act by developing without permission, we would have taken the same action. The difference is that other people have eventually taken their buildings down."

Mr Ball said he personally had received e-mails from people up and down the country with the overwhelming majority supporting the council's strong stance.

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SAVE DALE FARM

Groups opposed to forced eviction walk through Wickford

MORE than 150 people, from far and wide, marched in support of Dale Farm travellers and brought Wickford to a standstill.

Travellers, and their supporters, peacefully trekked from the town's train station to Dale Farm, at Crays Hill, near Billericay, to protest against the £18million eviction, which could start next Monday.

Although the march showed the travellers have support, it was not backed by the anticipated 700 people, and it had more of a carnival atmosphere than a protest.

The travelling community was largely represented by women and children who held banners aloft, which read: "I was born in Basildon - don't cut me out" and "shame on you" above a picture of Basildon Council leader Tony Ball.

Children also emotively chanted "save our home".

The protest, overlooked by police on horseback, left the train station at about 1.30pm on Saturday and soon stopped outside the Willows Centre in the High Street where one of the Dale Farm travellers was filmed by camera crews saying a prayer.

The procession turned into

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Market Road and then onto Irton Hill Road before making its way along London Road.

The soundtrack to the march was provided by London-based demonstration band Rhythms of Resistance.

One of its drummers seemed reluctant to talk about Dale Farm, but said the eviction was discrimination.

Supporters of Dale Farm had come from London, Oxford, Brighton, all over Essex, and even Belgium and Sweden.

Most of the protesters were part of campaign groups who had travelled to show support, with groups represented including the Socialist Workers Party, No Sweat, Amnesty International, Unite Against Racism, No-one is Illegal, Public and Commercial Services Union and South Essex Region of the Trade Union Congress.

Richard Sheridan, chairman of the Gypsy Council, dismissed the notion that groups were jumping on the bandwagon.

He said: "I'm glad to see people here from all over the country and all over the world."



■ Leave us alone - travellers and supporters march in Wickford Pictures: MAXINE CLARKE BA49085_05

Gratton Puxon, secretary of the Dale Farm Housing Association, said: "The broad support is good and this is not just about travellers, it is about people in general being made homeless, it's a wider issue."

Mr Puxon said there was a wave of support for the travellers' plight and he claimed Basildon Council had received 14,000 emails in August in support of Dale Farm.

Residents support the eviction

RESIDENTS all along the march route came out of their homes - and the vast majority said it was time to say goodbye to Dale Farm.

A lady in her 60s, who lives in London Road, said: "I think they should go."

"They have not got planning permission and have broken the rules."

"If they stayed, it would be one rule for them and one rule for everyone else. If I wanted a simple extension, I'd need permission."

Another London Road resident, a 43-year-old man, said: "The quicker they are moved on, the better. It shouldn't have been allowed to go on this long, but it's good that the council is standing firm."



■ Let us stay - Kathleen Gore and Shannon Egan BA49085_05

A resident in Gardiners Lane North, a man, 60, said: "There's no going back now and it's just a matter of time which, on the whole, I think most people are thankful for."

A couple who lived in

Gardiners Lane North had a little bit more sympathy for the travellers.

The woman, 30, said: "I think if they paid council tax, there would be a much better feeling towards them."

100 empty homes in traveller town

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Countdown to eviction

100 EMPTY HOMES

A week today the £18million eviction of travellers from a huge illegal camp, near Billerica, is scheduled to start.

We reported on Friday how some of the families at the Dale Farm site could return to legitimate properties in their heartland – the town of Rathkeale, in the Republic of Ireland.

Today, in the second part of a special investigation, more links can be revealed between the sprawling site and the Irish Republic town.

Echo INVESTIGATION

By JON AUSTIN
in Rathkeale, County Limerick

MORE than 100 houses stand empty and locked up. Some are mansion sized, others stuffed full of valuable antiques.

Welcome to Rathkeale – aka traveller town – Ireland's spiritual home of the 86 families facing eviction next week from Dale Farm, Crays Hill, near Billerica.

The empty homes are owned by travellers, who spend most of the year at Dale Farm, other camps across the UK, in Europe and even further a field.

While the debate over claimed shortages of traveller sites in Basildon and other parts of the country reaches a head at Dale Farm, the Rathkeale houses stand empty, shuttered off with metal grilles. They could easily house many families.

The majority are owned by the Sheridan clan – an extended community of Irish travellers, made up of about 12 family names, who traditionally trade in antiques, furniture and road surfacing.

Some members of the group have reportedly amassed assets worth hundreds of thousands of pounds, and in some cases it runs into millions of pounds.

These include Simon "Sammy Buckshot" Quilligan, who has an estimated fortune of 24 million euros, according to Irish investigator Eamon Dillon, who devoted three chapters of his book, the *Outsiders: Exposing the Secretive World of the Irish Traveller*, to families from Rathkeale.

Many of these names are the same surnames – Sheridan, Quilligan, Flynn, Gammell – which appear on planning applications for the Dale Farm site in 2001.

Passing through Roches Road, one of the main traveller areas in Rathkeale, two large boarded-up mansions stand out on the left and

6 Metal grilles on windows are pervasive throughout traveller-owned homes



■ Pony and trap – a man and two children take a ride through Rathkeale, County Limerick, in the Irish Republic



■ Stay out – one of the many boarded up properties



■ Grand home – a palatial property in Lower Main Street, Rathkeale

right. Further along is a jaw-dropping number of empty houses, broken up by occasional caravans and 4x4s.

Nearby Fairhill, an entire estate made up of empty houses, is virtually a ghost town. A small number had vehicles parked outside, some with UK plates, meaning they are registered at an English address.

Travellers have been buying houses in Rathkeale since the 1960s. The population of 1,500 is around 50 per cent traveller.

Most are homeowners, but around 50 families also have council homes.

The town has far more boarded-up properties than any sink estate, but these are substantial properties with pillars and large metal entrance gates.

However, the grilles across doors and windows require planning permission in the Republic of Ireland. Limerick County Council has ordered the owners of some houses to improve them or bring them back in to use. It is currently

dealing with 17 separate cases. A spokeswoman said: "There is a significant problem with derelict property in Rathkeale and the council has targeted this area."

"The legal processes involved can take a considerable length of time, particularly where properties have exchanged hands and not been registered."

"Metal grilles on windows are pervasive throughout traveller-owned homes."

"As the majority of owners of these homes are away overseas for many months each year, it was a major administrative task to try to serve notices."

So where are they all? Views differ.

One elderly male traveller told the Echo: "Most of these places will be owned by those at Crays Hill."

He even suggested where one prominent traveller from Crays Hill had a house, but although the name matched, this was unconfirmed.

In Roches Road, a traveller

6 They buy up a place and the owner next door moves out. That is how they have taken over

woman, disagreed. She said: "Those people in Essex don't own property here or they wouldn't be fighting their council to stay."

"So what if they have relatives over here?"

I observed a number of businesses were closed in High Street, half of which are traveller-owned, including the Black Lion pub.

Planning application notices in familiar names are posted in empty building windows.

Patrick and Thomas Culligan have bought the derelict former Molly B's pub. There are now plans to turn it into more housing.

Nearby are two squares, both surrounded by impressive Georgian-style houses built by the

wealthiest travellers. They appear to be occupied and one was again filled with antiques with a mobile phone number for those wanting viewings.

Settled non-traveller locals appeared reluctant to speak about the situation.

When asked what effect the huge number of empty homes has on the town, most people in the shops shrugged. One said: "They are away travelling and come back at Christmas."

Asked about any links to south Essex, most said they had seen news reports about the eviction.

Rathkeale Community Council has objected to a number of traveller applications, accusing some of making applications in different names, turning businesses into homes, and leaving them empty.

One shopkeeper, who would not be identified, said: "The travellers have so much money, eventually they will buy up the whole town."

"They buy up another place and the owner next door sells up,

IN TRAVELLER TOWN

Lived in Oak Lane, buried in Rathkeale



■ Elaborate tomb – the burial plot of Dan “Shippy” Sheridan, from Crays Hill, in Rathkeale

RATHKEALE cemetery has a clear connection with those who have lived, and died, in south Essex.

Elaborate headstones, bearing the names of Quilligan, Sheridan, O'Brien, Gammell and Flynn, are reportedly worth between £25,000 and £100,000.

Of the 50-plus gravestones dedicated to the clan, the Echo confirmed at least ten of these had been at the Crays Hill site at some stage.

Their photographs, often displayed on headstones, were recognised by villagers in Crays Hill, including former staff of the local store.

One corner appears dedicated to the Crays Hill site with a headstone bearing specific addresses in Oak Lane, such as James Sheridan, 46, of Denys View, Oak Lane, who died in 2005.

Danny Sheridan, 78, from Shalimar Bungalow, Oak Lane, was buried at Rathkeale in 2004.

Other plots also include John, 44, and Kathleen McCarthy, 41, who died in a mobile home blaze at Dale Farm in May 2005 and a large memorial for Dan “Shippy” Sheridan, 64, who died at the

**DANNY BOY
SHERIDAN
DIED 1st MAY 2004
AGED 78 YEARS
THE SHALIMAR BUNGALOW
OAK LANE, ENGLAND**

■ Essex link – the inscription identifies a former Dale Farm inhabitant

Dale Farm illegal site in the same year.

More recent was John Flynn buried in October last year. His memorial is a floral tribute and no permanent headstone has been created yet.

His wife Mary Flynn, 72, was told on Thursday last week she will still be evicted by Basildon Council, despite relying on an electric-powered nebuliser to help her breathe.

Dan Gammell, whose floral grave was next to Mr Flynn's, was also recognised shop assistant who worked at a local store in Crays Hill.

that is how they have taken over. Those properties in the square would be worth about 500,000 euros alone.”

The stature of these properties on the square gives an impression the occupiers could be the landed gentry of the town.

In Lower Main Street, there was a deserted property which could only be described as palatial.

The large house with grilles sat in its own private walled courtyard.

Since the 1960s the travellers have spread out from Roches Road and the Fairhill estate into other streets.

“Those people in Essex don't own property here or they wouldn't be fighting their council to stay

Most of Abbey Court, Abbeylands, Boherbouy, some other smaller roads, and all of Ballywilliam have been snapped up since the 1980s.

Even towards the edge of the town the large traveller properties with bolted gates, windows behind grilles and unkempt gardens were unmistakable.

Near Rathkeale Cemetery, accessed from Roches Road, was the most surprising abandoned home.

Hidden by walls was a compound, containing a house, grounds and even an overgrown swimming pool.

Although homes were empty, the number of travellers in Rathkeale still stood out. By early evening most

people, the High Street were travellers. I saw at least 12 travellers driving English registered vehicles.

One man, in his fifties, parked and walked into a sizeable property, in the High Street, which was being redeveloped.

There were Transit-type vans flying through Main Street and a man with children enjoying a pony and trap ride.

Will the real truth about the ties between empty homes in Rathkeale and the sprawling Crays Hill site ever be unravelled? Who knows.

But if significant numbers at Crays Hill do own homes there, it appears they are not intending to go back after the forthcoming eviction.

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